Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Week of May 5, 2008

BISON PRODUCERS' PROSPECTS BRIGHT

Despite challenges relating to the high Canadian dollar and feed costs, the bison industry is proving to be a success story in Saskatchewan livestock production and the broader agriculture industry.

Since the BSE crisis in 2003, the bison sector has enjoyed continuous growth because of successful efforts in market development. Today, producers are experiencing increasing demand and favourable consumer trends that are driving up bison prices.

The bison industry takes a threefold approach to marketing, employing different strategies for international, domestic and local markets. Demand is growing in all three markets, but they differ in key ways.

European demand for bison meat is driven by a keen interest in indigenous North American food products, which are viewed as natural. Overseas, bison meat is still a novelty, which allows producers to charge a premium price, but the market is challenging due to high tariffs.

In the United States, however, bison is less of a novelty, and the cultural similarities between Canada and the United States mean the markets are also similar. A significant proportion of Canadian animals and bison meat is exported to the United States because demand is thriving. This also drives up prices.

Within Canada, the retail market is changing. Whereas bison meat used to be a novelty found mainly in local businesses and butcher shops, today bison meat can be found in mainstream grocery stores and retailers. The addition of bison products to the meat counters of large retailers has helped the entire industry, including the local markets, because it validates public acceptance of the product.

Despite bison meat becoming more commonplace, its novelty still continues to benefit the industry.

"Lots of times, it's the novelty aspect that gets people involved with bison to start with," said Canadian and Saskatchewan Bison Association President Mark Silzer. "It's something new. They want to just try it. When they try it, they like it, and they make the decision to include it in their meal plans."

As it gains a greater foothold in the mainstream food market, the bison industry is being challenged to adapt to emerging consumer trends by developing products to meet consumer demand. This involves moving beyond the familiar bison burger to include the meat in ready-to-prepare meals and a broader variety of cuts and products in general.

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Other consumer trends that favour the bison industry include society's growing health-consciousness. Compared to other choices, bison meat is a lower fat, lower calorie alternative that provides a good source of iron. In addition, the consumer perception is that bison is a natural meat product.

Consumers are becoming more concerned about environmentalism and the humane treatment of livestock, and bison producers can point out that their animals require little handling or veterinary care, because, as a native prairie species, they are well adapted to the Saskatchewan climate.

Finally, consumers looking for organic and natural food alternatives are cautious of livestock that have been treated with growth hormones and antibiotics. "When looking at consumer trends, we just feel that bison are such a perfect fit," Silzer said.

In the face of growing consumer demand, industry experts are forecasting a long-term shortage of product. Silzer sees two main opportunities for growth on the supply side – current bison producers raising more animals, and other livestock producers venturing into bison production.

"They have access to pasture, they understand livestock. We feel they could benefit by diversifying their operations," he said.

For cattle producers, bison may be an attractive alternative, because of their low-maintenance care requirements. They only require supplemental feeding during the winter, and, given their thick coats, they do not need bedding. Their hearty immune systems require less veterinary care. Moreover, there are very few calving problems with bison. The end result is that production is significantly less labour intensive.

While efforts are underway to increase production, the industry is also examining how to improve utilization of its current resources. One component involves maximizing usage of slaughtered carcasses to develop a broader variety of products.

The bison industry has affected positive change over the last five years. "When you look at the reasons we're growing, it's due to the marketing efforts, and we're seeing markets grow. It's not just at the local level – we're seeing it at the national level and on a global basis," said Silzer.

"We couldn't get there if it wasn't for the awareness and the growing demand for this product from the consumers. We have a tremendous opportunity to grow this industry, but we need to get this story and this message out there."

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NEW WEBSITE ASSEMBLES SASKATCHEWAN BIO-ENERGY RESOURCES

Organizers are declaring the first month of Ag-West Bio's new website – which is intended to connect Saskatchewan individuals, companies and organizations involved in bio-products, biofuels and bio-processing – a resounding success.

The site – www.go-BiO.ca – was launched March 17 at the Canadian Renewable Energy Workshop, and has seen a steady increase in traffic and registered users.

"We wanted the website to be a self-entry database, so that once users become registered, they can edit their information as changes happen," said Ag-West Bio Communications Assistant Jackie Robin. "We also wanted the website to be searchable by key words."

Users can sort based on category (for example, bioenergy, biofuel, biomass, etc.), by function (such as financing, research and development, production) and by organizational type (including academic, industry or government).

The website increases the connectivity of producers and organizations operating in the industry. It was also designed to meet the challenge of making out-of-province organizations aware of Saskatchewan's vibrant bioenergy and biotechnology cluster.

"The go-BiO site enables those from outside the province to easily connect with Saskatchewan-based contacts in the areas of research and development, production, financing, supplies and other contract services," said Ag-West Bio Vice-President Ron Kehrig.

"The researchable database showcases our provincial capacity, and allows participants the opportunity to create new connections and partnerships, expanding business beyond our borders. We want those with a presence 'on the ground' in Saskatchewan to get their information into the database, and we want those from outside the province to see just what great contacts exist in the province to help them move the industry forward."

The website began with approximately 100 registered users who were solicited by a consultant. Since the launch, another 23 have registered. With the exception of federal agencies, the website is only open for registration to organizations with a physical presence in Saskatchewan.

The website has been popular with visitors as well as registered users. Monthly visitation is nearing

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2,000 guests after only a month-and-a-half of operation.

Funding for www.go-BiO.ca was provided by the Agriculture Council of Saskatchewan. In addition, Industry Canada provided funding for the website to become a prototype for other organizations and regions in Canada.

Ag-West Bio also receives funding support from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture.

Users wishing to view the website for themselves can visit it at http://www.go-BiO.ca/.

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HAIL ADJUSTING A BALANCE OF SCIENCE AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Farmers are only beginning to seed their crops, but Saskatchewan's hail adjusters have already begun their annual training and will soon have their eyes on the skies.

Hail adjuster Dave Baron says the occupation requires a balance of science and public relations. A hailstorm is a negative event, particularly on the farm, and Baron says it was not uncommon in the past for adjusters to be viewed with some apprehension by producers, stemming from older methods of adjusting when evaluations were more subjective in nature.

"The industry has become a lot more scientific in its measurement of loss," Baron said. The use of sampling and counts has helped the relationship between producers and adjusters become far more professional, and the adjusting practice has grown into a more objective and predictable process.

When a hailstorm occurs, the farmer's job is to contact the insurance company to file a notice of loss. The company deploys the hail adjusters, who contact the producer to set up an appointment. Upon meeting, an adjuster obtains details about the storm from the farmer, such as the date and time of the storm, direction of its progress, the length of time of precipitation and areas containing the most damage.

Upon heading out to the field, the adjuster performs a check every 40 acres. On every quarter-section, the adjuster examines each corner and walks to a spot in the middle to collect a sample.

Adjusters generally look for signs of injury and disease, but the sampling methods vary by crop and time of year. Canola, for example, can have multiple branches. The potential of a plant equals 100 per cent; the percentage of destruction equals the loss. With wheat, on the other hand, the adjuster samples 100 plants and counts the number of damaged plants to calculate the loss as a percentage.

The adjuster discusses the evaluation with the producer and submits a report to the insurance company so that the producer will be compensated.

The acceptance of the modern approach is most evident with younger producers. "With the newer generations of farmers, the need for hail insurance and the adjustment process is just a way of life for them," said Baron. "They're more willing to say, 'You're the professional. You do your job, I'll show you where the stuff is.'" With the older generation, Baron finds hail adjusters must work harder to gain their trust.

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Because of the relationship building element in hail adjusting, the work is a natural fit for teachers. Baron, himself, is a retired principal. "There are lots of reasons for its compatibility with teachers – they're free at that time of year, they have the interpersonal skills and are used to dealing with people, and they have a lot of experience doing evaluations to come up with percentage scores. They have organizational skills and all those sorts of things," he stated.

Regardless of the skills the adjusters bring to the job, there is always a tremendous amount to learn before being ready to do the work. When individuals express an interest in becoming hail adjusters, they are given a manual of theory – but the real learning takes place in the field shadowing an experienced adjuster.

When new hail adjusters feel ready, they write an exam to receive accreditation. After that, the insurance industry requires accredited adjusters to complete six hours per year of professional development.

For experienced adjusters, ongoing training often includes learning about crops that are less common in their regions or that may be popular in nearby provinces, in the event that they could gain ground here in Saskatchewan at some point.

In the meantime, Saskatchewan's hail adjusters rest their legs. Once the first storm hits, so begins their season of walking.

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NATIVE PRAIRIE APPRECIATION WEEK CELEBRATES THE EASTERN QU'APPELLE

The 2008 edition of Native Prairie Appreciation Week runs from June 22 to 28.

The highlight of the week is the annual two-day workshop and tour spearheaded by the Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP) and the Society for Range Management, to be held June 25 to 26.

The location of the tour changes every year. This year's destination is the Esterhazy area, under the title, "Discovering the Eastern Qu'Appelle."

"Our aim is to bring together diverse groups of people to celebrate the diversity of native prairie and the value it provides," said Karyn Scalise, Manager of PCAP. The participants typically include resource agency specialists from the fields of agriculture and conservation, as well as producers. Attendance averages 125.

This year's workshop will open with a discussion of the Last Cattle Frontier project in the Yorkton area. The local Regional Economic Development Authority (REDA) spearheaded promotional efforts to attract Alberta ranchers to the area, producing some very positive results.

"These ranchers have seeded a great deal of the area back to grass," Scalise said. "They've really started to increase cattle numbers out there, and that has some benefits for wildlife, because environments that have grass as permanent cover are usually better for wildlife than crop land."

Trevor Harriot, bird expert and award-winning author, will speak about the eastern Qu'Appelle River and its role with people and birds. John-Mark Davies, a water quality scientist from the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, will also discuss the river. The 2007 Environmental Stewardship Award Winner, Mark Johanson of Stockholm, will be on hand to give a presentation about his operation. Other speakers will discuss landscape change.

The field component of the event will include a visit to Johanson's farm. Other stops will include ranches offering examples of good stewardship and innovation in management. "We're also planning to have natural history stations set up, so we're going to be looking, for example, at aquatic insects, fish, hopefully some upland insects and we're still working on getting some other stations set up," Scalise said. "As part of the field tour, people would rotate through these stations and learn about each of the different elements."

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One of the most popular components of the annual tour, the Native Plant Identification Challenge, will also be featured again this year.

The celebration of native prairie is a unique opportunity in North America, and Saskatchewan's agriculture and environment ministries work together to make the province the only jurisdiction on the continent to proclaim Native Prairie Appreciation Week.

The workshop and tour is a collaborative effort of many organizations. They include the Prairie Conservation Action Plan, the Society for Range Management, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, Saskatchewan Agriculture, Saskatchewan Environment, Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Saskatchewan Stock Growers' Association, the Nature Conservancy Canada and the Yellowhead REDA.

Registration details have yet to be confirmed, but according to Scalise, a brochure is likely to be distributed by Ducks Unlimited Canada. Information can also be obtained by contacting the Saskatchewan PCAP office at (306) 352-0472.

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